

Judas Iscariot

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JUDAS ISCARIOT



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JUDAS ISCARIOT.



N this anniversary, in the Church calendar, of the Divine Tragedy, it has occurred to me that there may be some propriety in offering to your indulgent consideration a few very brief, imperfect, and rambling remarks about the dramatic representation of the passion and death of the "Man of Sorrows," as given last summer at Oberammergau. The subject has

been so much written about and lectured upon, by both clergymen and sinners, that no startlingly new and original ideas need be expected at this time, but rather a refreshing of your recollections, as painlessly as may be, upon a few points in a matter that has attracted the attention of many thousands of spectators and of many more thousands of readers during the past year. Neither is it any part of the present purpose to discuss the history of the early "Mysteries" or "Moralities" of which the modern Passion-play is a relic, any further than to say that this one at Oberammergau originated more than two centuries and a half ago as a votive offering to heaven in return for the alleged divine interposition in stay-

ing a plague among the people of that neighborhood; and in accordance with the original vow the play has ever since been repeated at intervals of ten years, except when some compelling cause—like war—has prevented. The representation has naturally passed through a course of evolution and improvement, and has been changed and pruned as the taste of successive generations has demanded. For example, the death of *Judas Iscariot* no longer occurs upon the stage; formerly, it was carried out in view of the spectators with much realism, and his dislocated viscera visibly gushed out in the form of a string of sausages, which were eagerly gobbled up by a crowd of appreciative imps and goblins. Again,

at the representation next succeeding the Franco-Prussian war, when German patriotism had been roused to its highest pitch, it is related that the *Christus* rose from the tomb bearing in his hand the German flag. But most of such offenses have been eliminated, and under the supervision of expert theatrical machinists, carpenters, and painters from the Royal Theater at Munich, the play is given with much of studied detail and a high degree of artistic finish in the stage arrangements and equipment.

Let us set out, then, from Munich this mid-June Saturday morning. At the station is a great, pushing, expectant crowd, of all sorts of people, eagerly seeking their railway tickets, or, having procured them, anxiously

elbowing for places in the crowded train. By good luck we find seats in a very comfortable carriage, and soon moving out of the station follow the line that rises slowly through the Bavarian Alps. The skies are lowering, and, remembering the object of our journey, a sensitive creature near us suggests that the heavens are already in sympathy with the victim of the morrow. All such imaginings are promptly banished at the way station, where we gladly throw open the windows to snatch the nutritious sandwich and foaming beer from the amiable and nimble maiden who so thoughtfully brings those comforts alongside. Then on we climb again until we see the snow and shiver into our heavy wraps. We are to leave

the line at Oberau, and as we near that place the crucifixes and shrines along the roadsides become more frequent, and, standing like guide-posts to the Passion-play, remind us again of our errand. At Oberau, true for once to the mendacious guide-book, the heavens begin to weep in earnest, and through the mud and rain we run the gantlet of Gaze's and Cook's hackmen until we find our carriage with its good-natured driver. He had read his "Black Beauty" to some purpose, and incurred no chidings for over-driving. Despite the rain, the two hours' climb to Oberammergau is charming. Zigzagging up the hard stone road, builded by a greater than our own Robinson, the glories of mountain, vale, and

river open on the sight, and the Alpine exhilaration lifts up the soul. All along the way we pass the peasants in twos and threes, heedless of the storm, all trudging toward the common goal. The sacred images with more pretentious shrines at every turn would prove we are entering the Holy Land marked by these memorials of the Nazarene. We pass the ancient Benedictine monastery of Ettal, founded in 1332, suppressed in 1803, and now used as a brewery. What a glorious development—from Benedictine to beer, our own chosen nectar!

O Beer! Milwaukee, Bartholmay, or Stroh!
Names that should be on every infant's tongue!
Shall days and months to years and centuries grow,
And still your merits be unrecked, unsung?



Oh, I have gazed into my foaming glass,
And wished that lyre could yet again be strung
Which once rang prophet-like through Greece, and
taught her
Misguided sons that the best drink was water.

How would he now recant that wild opinion,
And sing—as would that I could sing—of you!
I was not born (alas!) the “Muses’ minion”;
I ’m not poetical, not even blue:
And he, we know, but strives with waxen pinion,
Whoe’er he is, that entertains the view
Of emulating Pindar, and will be
Sponsor at last to some now nameless sea.

Oh, when the green slopes of Arcadia burned
With all the luster of the dying day,
And on Cithaeron’s brow the reaper turned
(Humming, of course, in his delightful way,
How Lycidas was dead, and how concerned
The Nymphs were when they saw his lifeless clay;
And how rock told to rock the dreadful story
That poor young Lycidas was gone to glory)—

What would that lone and laboring soul have given,
At that soft moment, for a pewter pot!
How had the mists that dimmed his eyes been riven,
And Lycidas and sorrow all forgot!

If his own grandmother had died unshriven,
In two short seconds he'd have recked it not ;
Such power hath beer. The heart which grief hath
 cankered
Hath one unfailing remedy—the Tankard.

To return to the brewery. There still exists a miraculous image of the Blessed Virgin, presented by an angel long ago, and much more wooden than the *Maria* of the Passion-play, which also is given by an angel—Miss Rosa Lang. But I anticipate. All these wayside signs of religious reverence have their effect even through the pouring rain and upon hardened American scoffers; and the climax is reached when we see the great stone cross standing distinct and bold against the sky upon the utmost summit of the Kofel mountain just over against the little vil-



lage of Oberammergau. Pardon, if you please, the length of this tiresome journey, but it has been up-hill all the way.

On our arrival we are allotted to our abiding-place by Mr. Sebastian Zwink, a villager of some position, and are driven to a little house at one end of the village, where Fraülein Schmidt receives us hospitably and shows us to our very primitive quarters. Here a disappointment awaits us, for we hoped we might lodge in the house of one Simon, or perchance with the honest Nicodemus, or one of the twelve (not barring Judas), with the merry possibility of receiving our food at the hands of Mary Magdalene or St. Veronica. But no rollicking son of

Zebedee, no Herod or Pilate, no proud Pharisee or even bashful Publican, is under our roof; and we learn with chagrin that our hostess is not even an Oberammergauer, but a pension-keeper from Munich, come up for the season to turn an honest penny. But she procures our tickets for the morrow's play, and with this anxiety quieted we go out to see the town.

Despite the deep mud, the streets are crowded with villagers, visitors from the neighboring places, and tourists from all the world over—from the Continent, from England, and from across the sea. On every hand are booths and shops offering food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, librettos and books of the play to the

literary, mementos marked "Oberammergau," but made in Munich, for the wealthy, and the inevitable wood-carvings for every one. There is every opportunity offered to spend your money, but there is a total and refreshing absence of any solicitation to buy their wares. The houses are whitewashed, and many of them have queer paintings of sacred subjects done in strong colors on the outside walls. It is all as quaint and picturesque as you please. The village is soon traversed, and we return to our house and so to bed. And the evening and the morning are the first day.

At three or four o'clock Sunday morning a cannon just outside our windows is touched off, and while its echo flieshallooing through the moun-

tains a brass-band starts a-braying up and down through the village, murdering unknown quantities of sleep and thoroughly rousing the strangers in their gates, for whom this racket is intended as a welcome by the hospitable but blundering villagers. At breakfast we learn that most of the inhabitants have been to early mass in preparation for the play.

It is with no little curiosity that one starts for the theater—this is a strange thing he is to see, the like of which cannot be found the whole world over, plain and homely though the surroundings be.

The auditorium of the playhouse is much like the grand stand at a baseball park, and holds 4000 people. It is built of unpainted boards, has

wooden seats, and is roofed over perhaps half of its extent, the sitters in the front half being exposed to the weather. In front of the auditorium is the orchestra, depressed out of sight, and beyond that is the stage, of which the middle part only is under cover. This middle part represents the façade of a Grecian temple, and here are arranged the tableaux and those scenes of the play which need to be prepared behind a curtain. In front of this middle space the stage floor extends perhaps twenty-five feet, and at either side is a street of Jerusalem, on one of which stands the residence of Pontius Pilate, on the other that of Annas the high priest. Through these streets, and over the walls, and under the arches the real mountains

and meadows are visible, and the chirping of a bird or two aids the realistic effect.

Promptly at eight o'clock in the morning, at the firing of a gun, the chorus of twenty-odd men and women, in long mantles of different colors, girdles, sandals, and diadems, comes down the stage from either side, with stately tread, and after a brief announcement by the choragus, the prologue follows, succeeded by two tableaux, and the play begins.

Without giving too much of the libretto, it may be said in a general way that the action closely follows the story of the Gospels, with such padding as the dramatic requirements demand, and each of the fifteen or sixteen divisions of the play is pre-

ceded by two tableaux representing scenes from the Old Testament supposed to foreshadow events in the New, to which broad hints the chorus adds its explanation of what you will see if you wait through the next act, working in a bit of sermonizing and good advice on the side. To my untutored ear the singing and chanting of the chorus, and the orchestral accompaniment, were admirable, the latter especially being wonderfully sweet at times, and never too loud for the voices.

Not to follow the play minutely, for it consumes seven or eight hours in representation, let us see what points live most vividly in the memory. It is, as a whole, certainly remarkable and interesting, for the

audience sits in rapt attention all day long, from eight in the morning until five at night, with an hour's recess at noon, in a cold and damp atmosphere, and many of us knowing next to nothing of the language. The tableaux are very beautiful, admirably planned and wonderfully carried out, in many of them the human figures numbering hundreds, and in all the posing, especially of the young children, often mere babies, is remarkable. I would particularly mention the pictures of the giving of manna in the wilderness, with the wonderful arrangement of colors and the immense throng of figures; the assassination of Amasa, with the imposing groups of warriors; Joseph in Egypt, with the lavish use of orna-

ment, decoration, and rich robes; and Moses and the brazen serpent, with the same artistic disposition of many people and the careful attention to detail. Some of the tableaux were hardly successful, and two or three, such as Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden, were too scantily clothed for comfort in that Alpine air.

Coming to the actors, of course much curiosity centers about Joseph Mayr, for the third season representing the *Christus*. To my mind, Joseph is himself a curiosity, while posing as the God-man. He is tall, to be sure, and consequently somewhat commanding, but he is ten years too old for the part, and he has a face far from meeting the most ordinary demand, let alone the ideals of the old

pictures, which, I suppose, we have all unconsciously adopted for our idea of the Christ face. Mayr's face is really hard, his eyes are small and close together, his mouth has a peculiar twist or sag to one side, giving him somewhat of that expression which we think of as belonging to a "ba-ad man." His hair is not auburn, like many of the old pictures, but black, with perceptible gray spots growing on his temples. To me, his attempts to assume the appearance of supreme humility under his indignities resulted in the whining attitude of a whipped school-boy. If my estimate is accurate, either Joseph Mayr is not a remarkable actor, or else the part is inherently above adequate representation; in either

case, Mayr's presumption in essaying the character challenges severe criticism. His initial appearance is on his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The curtain rises amid the distant notes of the Hosannah sung by the multitude, who gradually approach, thronging the streets and filling the foreground; and so well is this done that the spectator's disappointment is all the greater when the *Christus* appears upon the ass's foal. He sits the animal side-fashion, holding no reins, but keeping his hands before him in an attitude of blessing or prayer. His seat looks precarious in the extreme, and as he comes down the stage his efforts to keep his equilibrium are very distracting; when he finally alights," you wonder whether

he stuck on as long as he possibly could. Not a very impressive beginning, to be sure. But almost immediately afterwards he appeared overturning the tables of the money-changers and releasing the live doves in the temple, and as he seized the cords and scourged the offending merchants, exclaiming, "My house shall be the house of prayer, but ye have made it a den of thieves," a thrill ran through the audience that was not repeated all that day by any action of the *Christus*. Only once more, so far as I was concerned, did the actor Mayr make a deep impression, and strangely enough this was when he washed his disciples' feet at the Last Supper. The scene was a copy of Leonardo's great painting.

Just before departing, the *Christus*, closely attended by *St. John*, a sweet-faced youth, went about the table, and each disciple in his turn drew his foot from the sandal while the Master bathed it from the ewer carried by *St. John*. A homely scene enough, but done with an exquisite art—yet so simply withal that its pathos was extreme. After this, the agonizings in the Garden of Gethsemane were flat, and the tedious grimacing and wringing of the hands on the part of the *Christus* were rather amusingly and acceptably relieved when there swung out from the garden-wall a clumsy bracket, supporting a real, live angel clothed all in white, who proceeded to encourage him in a squeaky treble.

The crucifixion was painfully realistic. On the way the *Christus* fell under his heavy cross, and at the scene at Golgotha the two thieves were duly pounded with a stuffed club, the soldier carefully stuck his spear-point into the little sack of red fluid which was plainly visible under the *Christus* tights, and *St. John*, with the women, wept hysterically at the foot of the cross. The descent from the cross, copied after Rubens' famous canvas, was mechanically fine and extremely real. It is a conundrum how Mayr can hang there so long—some twenty minutes, I think, is the time—with no apparent support save a small block under one heel. Some people try to explain it by imagining a series of mysterious corsets

and bands attached to the cross, which disappear unaccountably during the descent. I expect, however, that it is a miracle. The last scene of all, the Ascension, was no credit to the Munich carpenters, the ascent of the *Christus* and his accompanying cloud failing of synchronism, and being accompanied by decidedly undignified jerks and hitches.

Good order and close attention abounded in the audience, but I failed to note any excited and weeping peasants, of whom the guide-books make great ado. Just after the curtain fell for the last time, a burst of applause was immediately quelled—as I supposed, by the pious desire of the natives to preserve their ceremony unprofaned, and my re-

spect was aroused ; but it seemed the true reason was that the orchestra had a few more bars to play which the people naturally wished to hear, and as the last wail of the violins died away a universal applause broke forth unrestrained.

The parts of *St. John*, *St. Peter*, *Pilate*, *Caiaphas*, *Herod*, the *Virgin Mary*, and others were excellently well done, and the work of the multitude and the mob was wonderful; but the bright particular star of the company, the Edwin Booth of Oberammergau, is Johann Zwink, the *Judas Iscariot* of the drama. This peculiar character, occupying the paradoxical position of having earned the name among Christians for all that is bad, and false, and treacherous by an act

through which Christendom traces its only claim to salvation and eternal happiness, this Jew, this apostle, this money-loving murderer and pitiable suicide, is portrayed by Zwink in a manner so masterful, so intense, so vivid and real, but so quietly the while and with such consummate art, as to compel the wondering admiration of his audience. There are the furtive hang-dog cast of countenance and the ever-tightening clutch upon the money-bag, attributes unnoticeable in the beginning, but growing and growing by perceptible degrees, until the incipient knavery, and greed, and jealousy develop into the irresistible passion that engulfs the wretched man. In vain he draws back and tries to retrace his way; deeply he curses

his own folly and his accomplices, and, flinging down the thirty pieces of silver, which ring falsely on the temple floor, he rushes forth into the night. Once more he appears, panting, terror-struck, with blood-shot eyes, plucking wildly at his streaming hair, mumbling of pardon and forgiveness, and of Hell. His biting remorse is sad to see, so truly does this great actor portray the workings of his self-convicted heart; no ranting and roaring is there, no tearing the passion to tatters, but rather a terribly quiet, deadly, hopeless wrestle with an irreclaimable past, the frightened look of a hunted thing gradually filling his eyes and face, a fearful palsy growing in his limbs, until with the awful cry, "Too late! Too late!"

he spies the convenient tree, tears off his girdle, twists it about his neck, reaches toward the fatal branch, and as his purpose is all but carried out the curtain hides the thrilling picture.

With *Judas* the interest of the play goes out. It was like the *Merchant of Venice* after Shylock's discomfiture. It was like any play with the strongest and most interesting part finished. If I mistake not, Johann Zwink is one of the remarkable actors of our generation, and I am not sure that that is doing him justice. Understanding never a word he said, his acting, voice, and gesture were to me deeply moving, and to those who followed his words they must have appealed tremendously.

It is wonderful that in this small village of perhaps 1200 souls so much stage talent has been developed. Yet the wonder of it lessens upon reflecting that this play has existed as a religious institution through so many years that each boy is taught from the cradle that his greatest earthly honor would be to play the *Christus*, or, failing that, to be thought worthy to represent a disciple, or a Roman or Jewish official, and each girl prays daily for the happy day when she may be called the *Maria* of the play. In the tableaux appear many young children, who are thus early familiarized with the stage. Nearly every villager at one time or another appears in the representation. As an instance, we had a couple of cheap

tickets for front seats which the rain prevented our using, so we offered them to two wee girls standing outside the theater looking, as we thought, with wistful eyes at the closed doors. They declined our gift, saying, with considerable surprise and much pride, "We don't wish tickets for the play; we are in it."

During the years between the representations of the Passion, they produce other plays, attempting even the Greek tragedies, and thus develop and train new talent. So it is only natural that the long course of years should have produced many excellent players, for most of them are admirable, extremely simple and unstagey, graceful and abounding in good taste in voice and action. Moreover, the

play is to them a solemn, religious ceremony, performed to the glory of God and in memory of their pious forefathers; and many strangers and foreigners are latterly being attracted to their performances, ready to criticize any shortcomings, and slow to award merited praise. Thus the gentle peasants have many incentives to make their peculiar institution quite perfect; and the great fear is that, abandoning their native simplicity, and erring from their natural good taste, they will yield to the suggestions of outsiders, make their performance simply artificial, turn it into a money-making scheme, and spoil it.

So many charges of mercenary motives have been made against the Oberammergauers, and they have

been so eager to deny them, that a few figures on that subject may be interesting.

Twenty-five regular performances are advertised for the season, and extra days may increase the number to thirty: at 4000 admissions per day this is 120,000 in all. The price of tickets averages, as nearly as I can figure it, \$1.75, which for 120,000 amounts to \$210,000. It is said that Mayr received only about \$80 or \$100 for the whole season of 1880, and it was claimed that the receipts went largely to pay for the erection of the theater and making new costumes. This last year the costumes cost about \$3500, which was considered somewhat extravagant, and the theater cost, perhaps, as much

more, and possibly the various expenses brought the profits down to \$200,000. Besides this there are about 3500 beds in the village. Each bed, with food for either one or two days, costs \$5, which is at least \$17,500 more going into the village each week for 18 weeks, making for the season \$315,000, taking no account of extras in the way of wine, souvenirs, and tips. It is possibly not a wild estimate to say that the village nets a half-million of dollars during the summer, and if Joseph Mayr does not get more than \$100 of it he is much simpler and holier than he looks. Where the profits go nobody seems to know, but they do go to show that the Passion-play is a financial success, whatever may be its

savor in his nostrils in whose praise and to whose glory it is offered as a sacrifice of thanksgiving.

Of course the casual tourist, coming directly from the contaminations of his profane pursuits, hesitates to consider the religious side of the spectacle, with which accordingly these remarks have nothing to do. Outside of professional religionists, I fancy few of the spectators attempt to appreciate the Passion-play except as a dramatic performance, and as such it suffers much through the physical surroundings and attendant discomforts. Up there among the mountain clouds rain-storms are very prevalent; the overcrowding of the village entails sufferings upon the visitors that the best efforts of the

villagers cannot obviate; the food is poor—in short, the stay is extremely uncomfortable. But after returning to a drier level, after the taste of the ill-cooked veal has departed, and the bruises from the awful beds have stopped their aching, and when recovered from the cold contracted in the open theater, you can rejoice at having witnessed this tragedy in the Bavarian mountains, so wonderful is it, so unique and strange. The crudities which provoked smiles at the time may be forgotten, the disappointment at the inadequate *Christus* may wear away, the beautiful tableaux and the thrilling pictures may grow dim, the haughty Roman and implacable Jew in Sanhedrim and judgment hall may all fade from

the memory, and the cries of mourning women may die in the distance; but among the most satisfactory recollections still remains the impression of that red-headed, hard-visaged, lean and hungry, mean and miserly traitor, coward, murderer, and suicide, the *Judas Iscariot* of Johann Zwick.

JAMES COSSLETT SMITH, JR.







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